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Regional Mine Action as a Confidence-building Measure

The mine-action cooperation through regional workshops described in this article tested the effectiveness of this cooperation as a confidence-building measure among neighbouring states and former combatants.

by Jernej Cimperšek [Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the OSCE] and Iztok Ho?evar [International Trust Fund]

Mines represent one of the most significant security, humanitarian, environmental, economic and development problems of the international community. Areas covered with mines directly and indirectly impact a community. Mined areas potentially manifest themselves in a large number of civilian casualties and influence the population's health in terms of losses in livestock, arable land, supplies, production and trade. Civilians have a constant fear and a feeling of animosity, distrust and intolerance as a result of mines.

Developing a Regional Approach

A regional approach to mine action has been slowly growing in southeastern Europe and the southern Caucasus. Slovenia, through the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance, has been actively involved in mine-action activities in southeastern Europe since 1998, using a regional approach. Then, in November 2000, three national mine-action centres (Albania, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the ITF established the South-Eastern Europe Mine Action Coordination Council, a technical body whose goal is a southeastern Europe free of mines.

By 2004 other countries, including Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia, from the region joined the initiative and started to cooperate on joint regional projects as well as on the exchange of knowledge, technologies and equipment. Being a technical body, SEEMACC is providing an arena for countries in the region to discuss solutions to the landmine problem, one of the major factors preventing normal socioeconomic development in affected countries.

With good regional cooperation and proposed joint projects, affected countries managed to attract additional donor support, which is necessary in order to achieve the common goal—a mine-free region by the end of the decade.¹ Similar initiatives should be started in other mine-affected regions to enhance confidence building and strengthen cooperation and trust among neighbouring countries.

To speed the pace of reducing the landmine threat that endangers populations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and to strengthen confidence and security in the southern Caucasus, in 2004–2005 the U.S. Department of State implemented the “Beecroft Initiative,”² an innovative multilateral program. Under this initiative, U.S. military personnel conducted joint humanitarian dem-

ining training of select groups of Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians. The government of Georgia hosted this training program at the Gori military base near Tbilisi, Georgia. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan each contributed 20 soldiers and civilians (for a total of 60 students) to be educated about modern humanitarian demining techniques by U.S. Army demining experts.

Regional Workshops Begin

The second initiative was the successful implementation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Cooperation and Capacity Building Seminar, held 1–2 October 2002, in Yerevan, Armenia, and co-chaired by the



Saloglu, Azerbaijan - ex-Soviet munitions storage site, September 2005. Unexploded ordnance scattered around pose great danger for local population.
Photo by Arne Hodalic

Armenian and Canadian governments. Here all countries of the region expressed consensus in suggesting the need for landmines to become a depoliticized issue and the need for a common strategy to approach local concerns.

The ITF continued promoting regional cooperation, incorporating observations from this first OSCE seminar. The result was the first Regional Management Training for Middle Managers of the Mine Action Program.³ This training of managers included participants from all countries of the region, improving their knowledge in mine-action management. Even more importantly, it established relations and raised confidence among participants. In concluding lectures, participants realized and suggested several points of possible cooperation on the regional level. This included joint training, cross-border mine-action projects, sharing of equipment, etc.

The Slovenian experience with SEEMACC managed to depoliticize the mine-action issue, establish a firm dialogue among members and stimulate joint cooperation. Slovenia sincerely believes regional cooperation and confidence building can be achieved to a significant extent through mine action and can also lead to other implementations of aid throughout the country, i.e., reconstruction of infrastructure. When countries start to cooperate after the war, they are much more attractive for donors in all other fields.

Workshop in Tbilisi

On 5–6 October 2005, the OSCE sponsored a regional workshop in Tbilisi, Georgia, with the intention of establishing the proper environment for dialogue among the nations of the South Caucasus and central Asian regions. The workshop focussed on “Confidence Building and Regional Cooperation through Mine Action.”⁴ Previously, cooperation in the region has been limited to some attempts at joint training.⁵

This workshop was organized by the OSCE Centre in Tbilisi and the ITF, and was sponsored by Canada, the Netherlands, Slovenia and OSCE. The specific objectives of the workshop were to create an open exchange of information on the issue of landmines and to promote successful models of regional cooperation for countries in the southern Caucasus and central Asian regions. The workshop contributed to confidence building among nations and the possibility of accession to the AP Landmine Ban Convention by non-signatory states from the respective regions.⁶

The workshop was also an occasion for the OSCE to examine how mine-action activities could improve the overall socioeconomic situations in the regions, complement OSCE core activities and, therefore, strengthen the OSCE’s advocacy role in the respective regions.

A secondary goal of the workshop involved starting discussions among responsible authorities in the respective regions that would ultimately lead to the eradication of mines and an improved socioeconomic situation in each region, contributing to better dialogue and cooperation among nations.

This workshop gathered over 80 military and diplomatic representatives from countries of the South Caucasus area, central Asia, Canada, Europe and the United States. Representatives from the European Commission attended, along with the OSCE, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, Geneva Call, Landmine Survivors Network, the Slovenian Institute for Rehabilitation and various local embassies and nongovernmental organizations.

At the workshop, several examples of confidence building and regional cooperation in other mine-affected regions were presented, which formed the basis for discussion on how regional cooperation might be achieved. For example, in the first part of the workshop,

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia presented the landmine and UXO problem of the South Caucasus. Many workshops such as this one are full of some successes and many failures. The key is to keep pushing the workshops because success is being achieved, even if change is gradual.

Some consensus was observed on the desirability for all countries in the region to work toward becoming States Parties to the Ottawa Convention once peace agreements to regional conflicts are reached. Georgia and Azerbaijan have already made positive steps by announcing a moratorium on the use, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines. The main obstacle for accession to the Convention is dealing with territory not controlled by national authorities. In the South Caucasus there are unresolved conflicts in the OSCE areas, including conflicts in Georgia (South Osetia and Abkhazija) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh).

A suggestion to include mine-action activities on the agenda of peace negotiations within the OSCE Minsk Group⁷ was widely supported, as well as the option to meet jointly in Georgia's offices with Georgia acting as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In the second part of the workshop, the representatives from three central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) presented the mine problems in their countries. Common problems are mines that lie on state borders, especially on the border with Uzbekistan. Only Tajikistan has joined the Ottawa Convention, possibly

serving as a role model for other countries in the region. Largely because of its status as a State Party to the Ottawa Convention, Tajikistan's mine-action program receives financial support from several donor countries. All three delegations from central Asia supported the idea of developing a follow-up regional workshop in the near future.

The Tbilisi workshop ended with a roundtable discussion in which participants discussed possible next steps in mine action. The following cooperation was suggested:

- Continuation of joint training
- Cooperation in mine-victim assistance
- Encouragement to announce a moratorium on the use of anti-personnel mines and to voluntarily submit reports on each country's respective landmine situation in accordance with Article 7 of the Ottawa Convention
- Marking of all known minefields
- Including the mine problem in negotiations within the OSCE Minsk Group
- Developing a follow-up workshop in Central Asia in the near future.

Conclusion

Cooperation in mine action among countries is one of the first steps for confidence building in the region, as experience from southeastern Europe shows.

A simple conclusion can be drawn from the Tbilisi workshop: Demining is considered a complementary activity of the OSCE, not a central one. However, since demining makes way for the core activities of the

OSCE—primarily disarmament, human rights and environmental issues—to be truly exercised, participation in mine-action activities is essential for OSCE. ♦

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On the basis of one of conclusion of the Tbilisi workshop, Canada and Slovenia, supported by Kazakhstan, prepared a follow-up workshop for central Asia in the framework of the OSCE. The workshop was held 26–27 March 2007 in Kazakhstan, but specifics were not available at the time of this writing.



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OSCE Workshop "Confidence Building through Mine Action" held in Tbilisi, Georgia in 2005.
PHOTO BY IZTOK HO EVAR